



# DOG D A Y S

A Year  
with  
Olive  
&  
Mabel



ANDREW COTTER

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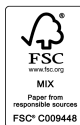
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# OCTOBER 2020

## **Friday 9 October**

It's a terrible thing to see a star struggling on stage, as I have witnessed tonight.

I suppose it happens to the best of them. I'm sure that once in a while Gielgud or Dame Maggie Smith would have momentary pause to try and remember a line or perhaps even have stumbled over a polystyrene rampart. But this evening the lead performer merely seemed distracted, wondering where she should be – at one point drifting aimlessly from one wing to another, before standing at the front of stage, mouth open and staring blankly into the lights. Thankfully this was when a member of the audience in the front row spotted an opportunity, rose from their seat, came forward and gently stroked her ears.

I'm not sure that anything we have experienced so far sums up the oddness of the Olive and Mabel thing quite like today – an appearance on stage at the Everyman Theatre in Cheltenham as part of the town's famous Literary Festival. I didn't know quite what to expect – or rather wondered what the audience might have expected. One hundred had been allowed in under current guidelines and the tickets had disappeared fast. My concern was that half of them would get up and walk out after a few minutes,

perhaps shouting obscenities while hurling their popcorn at us, to my shame and Olive's delight.

The surreal nature of the whole event had been evident from the moment we arrived at the hotel, where we were met by a very excited organiser and one or two people wearing headsets who were soon delegated to arrange a bowl of water for 'the headline act'.

The headline act had in the meantime decided that it was more in their interests to crash into the adjoining green room, where serious and seasoned authors were milling around and now having their serious and seasoned discourse interrupted by a dog or two appearing at their feet. On a few occasions it did look as if Olive was trying to sidle into the conversation with an amusing anecdote of her own, or more likely see if they might drop some crumbs her way – or even, such is her hopeful nature, that they would offer to fetch her a platter of assorted snacks from the buffet.

Then, after a couple of interviews, it was on to the theatre itself where we were escorted to a dressing room and Mabel padded nervously around as if trying to remember her lines, or where she was supposed to be during the opening number. I was more concerned that people would simply be bored and that, after the videos which had been enjoyed around the world, this live performance would be something of an anti-climax. Largely because there was no real performance planned – we were just supposed to sit on stage and talk.

But I needn't have worried. After I ambled out to a smattering of polite applause and took my seat with the moderator, friend and fellow broadcaster Jill Douglas, I settled into an armchair and we began our conversation.

Sparkling though our chat was, if we had carried on like that, I'm sure there would have been one or two raised eyebrows in the audience and perhaps even an audible muttering of 'Twenty quid

for this bollocks?’ but the more observant would have spotted the dog beds either side of my chair and I thought it best not to leave the crowd waiting too long. So, after a minute, we paused and I summoned the real stars from the wings where they were being held by my partner Caroline and they trotted happily onto the stage, to a noise that wouldn’t have been heard in the theatre since Bobby Davro’s seminal Hercule Poirot in *Death on the Nile* in 1987.\*

What takes me aback is that this is the first time I have seen a mass reaction to these two dogs in real life. When you get the laughter and the pleasant messages from thousands online, there is an acknowledgment but also a detachment. Here, the enjoyment is live and right in front of us. So when Olive rather loses her way – or realistically it is more that she is hunting for edibles – it is all part of the entertainment. As Mabel tenderly chews the stuffed rabbit beside me – possibly still hoping for some sort of prompt – Olive returns to her own bed, circles twice and collapses with a heavy sigh. All of which is enough for a round of applause.

We then show some of the videos on the big screen, I talk about the making of them, talk about the dogs, talk to the dogs. I do feel that the crowd deserves a little bit more after parting with their hard-earned cash, so every now and again I prod the dogs to life by stealing the rabbit, waving a bag of treats in front of their noses, or just lifting up an ear and folding it over to comic effect. But in truth it doesn’t really matter what Olive and Mabel do, it is enough just that they are there. I think everyone involved was simply happy to escape from screens and enclosed lives and get into the real world, to have a night out and feel normal again – feel

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\* *I’m pretty sure that such a production never took place. But it’s late and I haven’t got the energy to look up historic performances at the Everyman Theatre in Cheltenham.*

normal by purchasing a ticket to watch two dogs curled up in their beds.

Stranger still is to come as, once we have finished, we leave by the stage door to be greeted by dozens of audience members. Excited exclamations and chatter are followed by requests for photos. For a few minutes we are the Beatles – maybe not at the very height of the mania, but certainly getting close to the early days in Hamburg.

So I become Brian Epstein, gently easing myself out of the way and telling Olive and Mabel to sit properly as, one by one, the disciples move cautiously forward to say hello. Mabel looks rightly baffled and not a little concerned, Olive as if she has fully expected this attention and that it is entirely deserved. Eventually we have to pull ourselves away and walk down the street, dropping the dog beds every few paces, with just a few stragglers jogging after us and hoping for their own chat with the stars.

Back in the hotel I can reflect on it all. Nothing is normal at the moment, but this wanders ever deeper into abnormality by the day. Yet there's no denying it's great fun as well – to actually encounter some of the people who have enjoyed Olive and Mabel and to see their reactions upon meeting the dogs.

Meanwhile Lennon and McCartney are out for the night, twitching away and processing events, taking everything in their strides as they always do and happy to simply be with us.

Although now that I think about it, Mabel is probably Ringo.

## **Sunday 11 October**

Michael Hutchence, Radiohead, Margaret Thatcher, Björk, Stephen Fry, Martin Scorsese, Lenny Kravitz and the Spice Girls.

While it does have the air of a guest list for nibbles and drinks at Richard Branson's house circa 1996, these are in fact just a few

of the figures captured by the camera lens of Harry Borden. There is, apparently, more of his work hanging in the National Portrait Gallery than of any other photographer and the number and calibre of stars he has worked with is extraordinary. And to this list he can now add two dogs who were not entirely won over by his reputation.

Today was a photoshoot which had been organised by an American publication, *Outside* magazine, as they were keen to make Olive and Mabel two of their 'Outsiders of the Year'. Why not? I thought, in this new world which makes very little sense at all, and so the services of Mr Borden were enlisted. Whenever I have had reason to deal with any American organisation, I am baffled by the resources available to them. Thus a man who has had Morgan Freeman sit for him would now be trying to issue that literal instruction to a couple of Labradors.

In fact, it nearly didn't happen, with a frantic rush to get there, as beforehand I found myself doing what I used to refer to as 'my job', i.e. commentating on some sport. Since I have had only three days of such broadcasting in the last eight months, this couple of days – covering the PGA Championship golf – has been undeniably welcome but also unfamiliar. As we got underway there was a very strong possibility of me talking into the wrong end of the microphone, or enquiring of the producer, 'I see . . . And I just watch the pictures of the people hitting the ball and say some words? Well, let's give it a try.'

It was also less familiar since we weren't at the event itself – to be there I would have had to get into the strictly controlled 'bubble' at Wentworth Golf Club in Surrey by Friday afternoon. If that had been possible, I would have then been unable to leave until the event was over, awakening like Patrick McGoohan in *The Prisoner*, hemmed in by the fences and hedgerows of the exclusive estate and pursued by a giant white balloon if I tried to escape.

This was, indeed, the original plan, until I had to gently inform the editor that I was booked to appear on stage in Cheltenham with my dogs on Friday night. The fact that he barely raised an eyebrow shows that my reputation is now widely accepted.

As it happened, it all worked out well enough. Doing commentary off monitors from the BBC Sport base in Salford is far from ideal, but I was still able to race away at the end of the day's play to get to our appointment with Harry. It's unclear exactly how much experience he has had working with animals, but he appears to be learning as he goes along in this regard – discovering that while they might have less ego than some of his previous subjects, they also have remarkably short attention spans. Even shorter, perhaps, than the Spice Girls. By the time I arrive there is only about half an hour of useable day remaining, but he quickly finds locations and light and ushers me into various poses and tries to do the same with Olive and Mabel, chatting away in the manner of the expert photographer and firing off shot after shot.

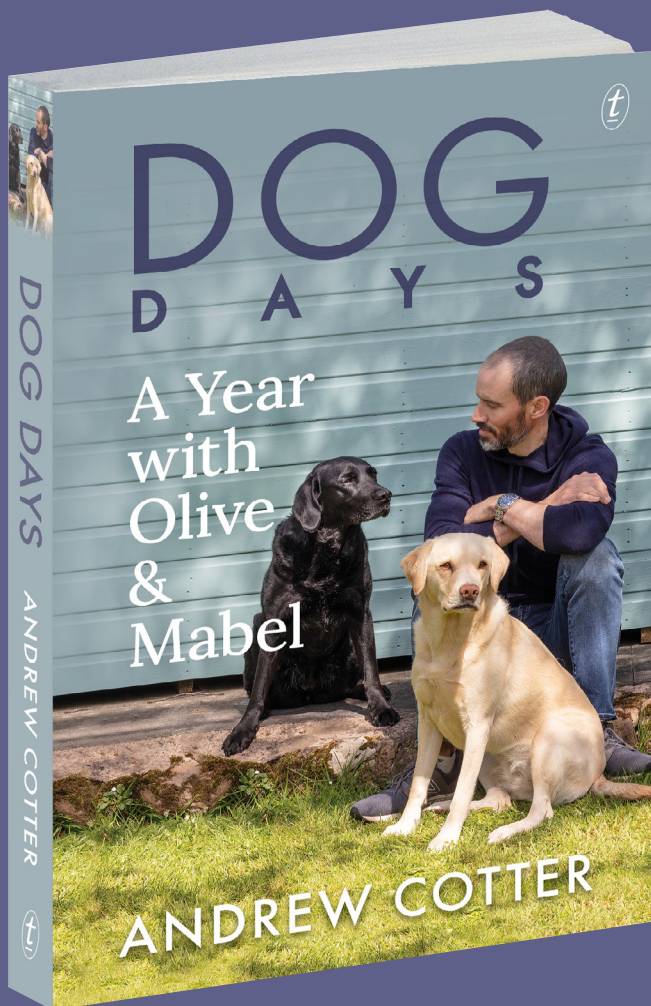
Caroline is thankfully on hand to both hold a reflector shield and break out the ever useful 'Ooh, here . . . what's THIS?' to get the dogs – and possibly me – to look in a certain direction. Although it only works briefly to attract their gaze and you have just a second or two to capture the moment before the dogs realise that the 'this' in question is a big fat nothing and they are being comprehensively lied to. The 'Ooh, whassis?' thereafter offers diminishing returns with their interest waning. Admittedly Olive grows weary of it well before Mabel who, thanks to a combination of goldfish memory and unerring trust, remains intrigued by the 'this' that Caroline promises she has, on at least five or six more occasions.

The shoot almost done, Harry spots that he might have a final opportunity – all three of us are asked to sit in the boot of my



car and at one stage I find myself rolling around on the dog-hair-covered rug.

As we wrap up, our expert photographer seems pleased with what he has managed to get in the available time, but I am left wondering if he would have tried to get Margaret Thatcher to do this. On the way back home, Mabel asks Olive if she ever did find out what Caroline had hidden in her hand.



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